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ABSTRACT

Research on language in Hong Kong is reviewed, focusing on work in the areas of discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and survey research. Discourse analysis studies examined include research on classroom language, discourse in other settings such as work environments, business telephone communication, news media discourse, and student language use. Sociolinguistics studies include those on English, Cantonese, and Cantonese-English Mix. In the category of survey research are two language diary studies, many questionnaire studies on both attitudes and usage, and several matched-guide attitudinal studies. Research shortcomings are noted. It is concluded that while research problems existed before 1990, more recent studies have been characterized by more attention to research design, rigor, and standardization of procedures and reporting conventions. (MSE)

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RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE IN HONG KONG: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Research on language in Hong Kong is reviewed in the categories of discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and survey research. The major results are summarized with respect to these categories for Cantonese, English, and Cantonese-English mixed code. Shortcomings of research on Hong Kong language which existed before the 1990's are detailed, and it is maintained that these are being overcome by more attention to research design, rigor, and standardization of procedures and reporting conventions in current research.

Introduction

The research on language in Hong Kong is summarized in Figure 1:

[Figure 1]

As shown in Figure 1, the main research traditions and principal works investigating language in Hong Kong can be divided into the categories of Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistic, and Survey research. The Discourse Analysis studies include research on classroom language by Johnson (Johnson 1982, 1983; Johnson & Lee, 1987) and one of his students (Lin 1988) and examination of discourse in other settings, including the workplace investigations of Bilbow (1993) and Rogerson-Revell (1992), the analysis of business telephone communication by Scollon (1993), the examination of the discourse of the news media by Li et al. (1993), and the investigation of student language use by Gibbons (1983, 1987, ch. 4). The Sociolinguistic studies can be further divided into findings related to English (Bolton & Kwok 1990; Scollon & Scollon 1993), Cantonese (Bauer 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1984, 1986; Luke 1984; Pan 1982), and Cantonese-English mixed code (Chan 1993; Gibbons 1979a, 1979b, 1983, 1987, chs. 3 & 5; Luke 1984). In the broad category of Survey research are included two language diary studies, a large number of questionnaire studies having to do with both attitudes and usage, and a number of matched guise attitudinal studies.

[Figure 2]

As background to the main research findings on language use and language attitudes in Hong Kong, let us first review the demographics and composition of the three main linguistic varieties in use by bilingual Cantonese L1, English L2 speakers in Hong Kong. In terms of **Demographics**, 95-98% of Hong Kong people are Chinese, having Cantonese as L1 or lingua franca; 76-88% (depending on source) are native Cantonese speakers.

As to Cantonese-English Mix, there is little "hard" data on the mixed code, but it is apparently a common phenomenon, documented in secondary and tertiary academic contexts and anecdotally reported in companies and in the society at large by Luke (1984) and Luke and Richards (1982), and in studies of restricted groups such as those by Gibbons (1979, 1983, 1987) of Hong Kong university students or Johnson (1982, 1983) and Lin (1988) of secondary teachers. English is L1 to less than 2% of the population; only 6% of the local bilingual population is estimated to be near-native in their English competence by Bolton and Luke (1990).

Sociolinguistics

Cantonese exists in Hong Kong in distinctive Hong Kong "High" and "Low" varieties (Luke 1984). The High variety is a more conservative and literary variety which occurs in news broadcasts, formal speeches, and other formal rhetorical functions. The Low variety is a phonologically and grammatically more innovative variety--as described by Bauer (1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1984, 1986) and by Pan (1982)--which is the normal form for everyday language use in the Cantonese L1 community.

Cantonese-English Mix, as described in Gibbons' (1979a, 1979b,

1983, 1987, chs. 3 & 5) work and more recently by Chan (1993), consists of partially assimilated English lexis in a Cantonese base.

The English spoken in Hong Kong includes several distinctive Hong Kong features in phonology, syntax, and discourse, as described by Luke and Richards (1982) and Bolton and Kwok (1990).

Attitudes to Linguistic Varieties

Cantonese is consistently associated with Chinese values such as humility and financial success (Gibbons 1983, 1986, ch. 3; Lyczak, Fu & Ho 1976). The Cantonese-speaking population in Hong Kong (and indeed throughout Guangdong province and the neighboring Southern regions) is high in ethnolinguistic vitality, as discussed by Pierson (1987) and by Pierson, Giles, and Young (1987). In Hong Kong, this population maintains its ethnolinguistic identity and ethnic language within the family and with other close social contacts, while at the same time diverging from outgroup (that is, non-Chinese) speakers and resisting becoming fluent in the primary outgroup language, English--in spite of its potential value in terms of career and mobility.

Cantonese-English Mix attracts mixed attitudes. Thus, while Gibbons' Hong Kong university student subjects showed evidence of overtly negative attitudes towards the mixed variety, he also found some evidence that this variety had covert status among the same population (Gibbons 1983, 1987 ch. 4). In terms of how successful, fashionable, and Westernized a person is, the values given to the Cantonese-English Mix guise in Gibbons' research were intermediate

between those of the Cantonese and English guises, perhaps representing what Scotton (1976) characterized as a "neutral" language choice.

English also attracts mixed attitudes, mainly involving status, Westernization, and arrogance. The investigations of researchers in the 1970's and 1980's--e.g., Bond (1983, 1985); Fu (1985); Lyczak, Fu, and Ho (1976); Pierson, Fu, and Lee (1980); and Pierson and Bond (1982)--confirmed these mixed attitudes towards English on the part of Hong Kong secondary and tertiary students, though recent research (Pennington & Yue 1993, forthcoming) suggests less negative attitudes towards English now than before the Joint Declaration setting up the return of Hong Kong to China.

Looking at motivation, rather than studying English because of its intrinsic interest or because of a desire to integrate into English-speaking cultures, the typical Hong Kong student is motivated by instrumental and other extrinsic factors such as promises of better career prospects and threats of not passing courses or being able to continue studies at tertiary level (Lin et al., 1991; Richards 1993). These extrinsic motivators are generally either weak expectancies of rather distant and amorphous, potential positive outcomes, or rather stronger expectancies of potential negative outcomes. It seems doubtful that these vague or negatively oriented expectancies are sufficient to motivate the effort needed for high English achievement. In fact, for these students, so-called "extrinsic motivation," although it may have some value in motivating effort towards learning English, at the same time works against motivation in the sense of desire. It therefore may in fact inhibit the highest level of performance, since it works against

the development of intrinsic motivation for performing tasks and positive attitudes towards the English language (Pennington 1993).

Language Use

Cantonese is used mainly as an L1 by Hong Kong ethnic Chinese in "low" or "inner" functions, and in informal, intimate situations (for example, interactions in the home and with peers), and English is used mainly by Hong Kong ethnic Chinese tertiary students and graduates with Westerners and with each other in "high" or "outer" functions, and in formal, official situations such as work and government (Gibbons 1983, 1987; Pennington et al. 1992). Use of Cantonese expresses intimacy and solidarity, while use of English expresses power and prestige (Lin 1988, 1991).

According to the review of Pennington (1993), Cantonese-English Mix has an interestingly iconic usage profile. It is used mainly by Hong Kong ethnic Chinese tertiary students or graduates in intermediate or "mid-level" functions and situations--such as middle level managers' meetings in some companies--which are between the Cantonese and the English poles for language choice. That is, it is used in functions and situations which are between formal and informal, public and intimate, and which simultaneously emphasize aspects of both solidarity and difference, of equality and power differential. Considering its value in establishing a communicative and social middle-ground, one would expect the use of Cantonese-English mix to be widespread and/or spreading, though there is really no hard evidence on the demographics or general sociolinguistic profile of mixed code.

Although there have been many important studies on language conducted in Hong Kong in the past two decades, a number of shortcomings emerge from a review of that literature, as shown in Figure 3:

[Figure 3]

Because of the focus in Hong Kong language research on academic settings, almost all cross-sectional data has come from students (e.g., Gibbons 1983, 1987; Pierson, Fu & Lee 1980; Pennington et al. 1992; Walters & Balla 1992). Very little data has come from the workplace, though studies of this milieu such as Bilbow's (1993) and Poon's (1992) are adding important new information to the research base. The research profile of the period before the 1990's to a large extent represents isolated researchers in different departments and institutions doing "quickie" small-scale studies with little attempt to relate their work to other work on bilingualism. And when it comes to longitudinal research on Hong Kong language, there is virtually none beyond basic demographic surveys.

Another problem has been the general lack of rigor in past research in terms of establishing an adequate theoretical base and methodology. For example, problems in questionnaire design include: problems with questionnaire design, problems with construct validity, and lack of piloting. All too often conclusions have been highly speculative and not clearly derived from data. This is related to the problem of contamination of research by specific political agendas, including "culturally appropriate" agendas, "academically correct" philosophical agendas, and liberal or con-

servative educational agendas of various types.

There are common and standard biases that seem to have been shared by many researchers in Hong Kong, including the "liberal" bias proclaiming that Cantonese speakers should be able to choose the language of instruction; the "reverse-liberal" bias that says Hong Kong students need to learn English; and the "anti-liberal" bias that Hong Kong students must learn Chinese. With surprising frequency, articles are written entirely or largely in a kind of "high rhetoric" with emotional undertones or overtones.

Encouraging signs on the current Hong Kong language research scene include bigger samples (e.g., Balla 1991, 1992; Walters & Balla 1992), repetitive sampling of the same population, more diversified and representative samples (e.g., Bolton & Kwok 1990), and more data from workplace contexts or community contexts (e.g., Bilbow 1993; Li et al. 1993; Poon 1992; Rogerson-Revell 1992). Nowadays you can also see in Hong Kong more collaborative research teams working across more institutions, with more replication studies, and a more in-depth perspective, developing convergent lines of research.

These days the studies tend to be more carefully grounded, to have sophisticated questionnaire designs, with more attention to piloting, and a broadening of the interpretive basis for making conclusions or a more conservative level of inference. I think researchers are also consciously avoiding "old hat" agendas. More people are doing research in Hong Kong who have no interest in or awareness of local biases, and these new researchers are using more standard reporting conventions. In sum, it could be said that the

most recent generation of research in Hong Kong is a specific reflection of a general trend of increasing sophistication in second language research.

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Figure 1
MAIN RESEARCH TRADITIONS AND PRINCIPAL WORKS INVESTIGATING LANGUAGE IN HONG KONG

Discourse Analysis

Classroom (Johnson 1982, 1983; Johnson & Lee 1987; Lin 1988)

Other (Bilbow 1993; Gibbons 1983, 1987, ch. 4; Li et al., 1993; Rogerson-Revell 1992; Scollon 1993)

Sociolinguistic

Cantonese (Bauer 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1984, 1986; Luke 1984; Pan 1982)

Cantonese-English Mix [mixed code] (Chan 1993; Gibbons 1979a, 1979b, 1983, 1987, chs. 3 & 5; Luke 1984)

English (Bolton & Kwok 1990; Scollon & Scollon 1993)

Survey

Language Diary (Gibbons 1983, 1987, ch. 2; Pennington et al.1992)

Questionnaire (Bond 1983; Balla 1991, 1992; Balla & Walters 1992; Bolton & Luke 1990; Fu 1975; Lai 1993; Pennington & Yue 1993, forthcoming; Pierson, Fu & Lee 1980; Pierson, Giles, & Young 1987; Poon 1992; Yang & Bond 1980)

Matched Guise (Bond 1985; Gibbons 1983, 1987, ch. 6; Lyczak, Fu & Ho 1976; Pierson & Bond 1982)

Figure 2
MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS
ON LANGUAGE ATTITUDES AND LANGUAGE USE IN HONG KONG

Demographics

Cantonese: 95%-98% Chinese, 76%-88% native Cantonese speakers

Cantonese-English Mix: little "hard" data, but apparently a common phenomenon, documented in secondary and tertiary academic contexts and anecdotally reported in companies and in the society at large

English: L1 to less than 2% of the population; 6% of population estimated to be near-native bilingual

Composition of Linguistic Varieties

Cantonese: distinctive Hong Kong "High" and "Low" varieties

Cantonese-English Mix: Partially assimilated English lexis in a Cantonese base ["mixed code"]

English: several distinctive Hong Kong features

Attitudes to Linguistic Varieties

Cantonese: associated with Chinese values (e.g. humility, financial success; high ethnolinguistic vitality

Cantonese-English Mix: mixed attitudes, some overtly negative, some may indicate covert prestige

English: mixed attitudes: status, Westernization, arrogance; link between attitudes, motivation and achievement unclear, though students uniformly express strong interest in learning English

Language Use

Cantonese: used mainly as an L1 by Hong Kong ethnic Chinese in "low" or "inner" functions and in informal, intimate situations (e.g. home, peer interaction); expresses intimacy and solidarity

Cantonese-English Mix: used mainly by Hong Kong Chinese tertiary students and graduates in "mid-level" functions and situations that are between formal and informal, public and intimate, and that emphasize solidarity or difference, equality or power differential

English: used mainly by Westerners and Hong Kong Chinese tertiary students and graduates in "high" or "outer" functions and in formal, official situations (e.g. work, government); expresses power and prestige

Figure 3
RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE IN HONG KONG

SHORTCOMINGS IN THE IN THE 1970s & 1980s	ENCOURAGING SIGNS IN THE 1990s
Lack of data	**More data**
Focus on academic settings	Bigger samples
Almost all cross-sectional data from students	Repetitive sampling
	More representative samples
Very little data from the community or workplace	More data from workplace
One-shot orientation	**Big-picture orientation**
Isolated researchers in different departments & institutions	More collaborative research teams
	More replication studies
Short-term perspective	More in-depth perspective
Insufficient attempts to make connections with relevant work	Convergent lines of research
Lack of rigor	**More systematic studies**
Lack of attention to theoretical and methodological foundation	More grounded design
	More sophisticated questionnaire design
Questionnaire design (nondistinct categories, construct validity, neutral central choice, no pilot)	More attention to piloting
Highly speculative, interpretive conclusions based on little or no data	Broadening the interpretive basis or using more conservative approach to inferencing
Contamination by politics	**More standard research style**
Specific political agendas (cultural, philosophical, educational)	Conscious avoidance of "old hat" agendas
Standard "liberal", "reverse-liberal" or "anti-liberal" bias	Disinterest in or unawareness of local biases
"High rhetoric" betrays emotional undertones or overtones	Use of standard reporting conventions